Courting Women @ E-Com

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Abstract: This paper chronicles the emergence and promotion of a commercial Internet environment for women, fuelled by the entry of large corporate interests. While not surprising that women as a market would be targeted by commercial interests, the tension between e-commerce applications directed towards women as consumers, versus the usage of the Internet as a locus for citizen-oriented activities, provides a useful example of a salient issue the Internet faces as digital capitalism continues unheeded.

1. INTRODUCTION

"The feminization of the Internet is a very important shift, because women seek out different Web destinations than men, spend less time surfing online, and are the primary decision-makers in the majority of household purchases" [5].

The commercialization of the Internet and the creation of new consumer services continues unabated. Some fear that manoeuvring by telecommunications firms, new start-ups and an emergent digital entrepreneur class will lead to the demise of the Internet as a forum for use by civil society. Luring Internet surfers online in order to partake of various electronic commerce (e-commerce) services has been a challenge. Guaranteeing the privacy and security of online transactions is only one obvious impediment; the other is convincing consumers that 'shopping online' is a fun and worthwhile activity. During the early 1990s the percentage of women online hovered between 15-35% [23] with most accessing the Internet through institutional affiliations. As the percentage of

women online increased, prevailing marketing wisdom dictated that designing services for women would boost the overall e-commerce agenda.

This paper will document some of the efforts to lure women onto the web. It will briefly chronicle the emergence and promotion of a commercial Internet environment for women, fueled by the entry of large corporate interests. While it is not surprising that the women's market would be targeted by commercial interests, most of the services designed for women cater to a middle and upper-middle class and reflect a 'women's magazine sensibility.' The tension between e-commerce applications directed towards consumers, versus Internet use as a locus for citizen-oriented activities, provides an example of a salient issue the Internet faces as digital capitalism continues unheeded.

2. DOT.COM

Electronic commerce is defined as "a modern business methodology that addresses the needs of organizations, merchants, and consumers to cut costs while improving the quality of goods and services and increasing the speed of service delivery. The term also applies to the "use of computer networks to search and retrieve information in support of human and corporate decision making" [13]. A burgeoning marketplace of ideas, people, and technologies are being developed, designed, and deployed to support electronic commerce on the Internet.

Electronic commerce promises to shorten procurement cycles through online catalogs, ordering, and payment; expedite Quick Response (QR) and Just In Time (JIT) systems that reduce inventory and facilitate restocking; shrink product development cycles; and accelerate the market delivery of goods and services that can be individually configured for customers.

This 'information entrepreneurialism' - "the active attempts of organizational groups to take advantage of changes in key social relationships and in information technology to gain market and organizational advantage" [15, p.730] which exists within a system of 'information capitalism' - "the overarching economic system in which organizations are expected to profit from the use or sale of information" [15] heightens the potential for consumer privacy breaches.

The Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation (OECD) has taken a lead in promoting e-commerce activities and shaping public policy around issues such as privacy, security, and interoperability. The 1997 Sacher Report brought together senior executives of major enterprises that use electronic commerce to construct a framework of conditions necessary for the "favourable development of global electronic commerce and the

action required by governments at national and international levels.” Events, such as the Ministerial Conference on Electronic Commerce, held in Canada in 1998, have provided a means for dominant countries to identify their “shared vision for global electronic commerce.” An overarching theme in e-commerce discourse has been the facilitation of global economic competitiveness whilst ensuring consumer protection online. The more widespread social implications of e-commerce, such as how citizens become reconfigured as consumers in such an environment, have received little critical attention.

The increase in commercial websites has been characterized by a phenomenal growth rate. In January 1996, a perusal of Yahoo's directory of companies brought up 35,373 listings for over 100 companies [24]. By September, 1999 the number of companies listed in Yahoo was 492,622. September, 1999 figures for domain names registered at InterNIC illustrates the widespread increase in commercial domains: of the total domains registered worldwide (10,910,997), 6,614,850 were .com domains.

Schiller's [22] account of how transnational corporations (INCS) have seized upon the Internet as the newest market conquest, expedited by global neo-liberal policies, provides ample evidence of the need to address the accelerating inequities that are a consequence of digital colonialism.

3. SHOP TILL YOU DROP

Yahoo co-founder Jerry Yang expects growth in electronic commerce to be fueled by a rise in the number of females on the Internet. He expects there will be about 100 million users, with women accounting for half of them. In 1995, the Internet was primarily used in businesses and its 20 million users were 90 percent male, ‘a geek medium’ [31].

It is worthwhile reminding ourselves that, in the earlier days of the Internet, various women and women's groups realized the dynamic potential of networked communications as a way to foster feminist communication across international borders. The use of the Internet by women's NGOs has been well documented [1, 2, 23, 26]. Technological improvements have made the Internet a more popular medium, echoing many of the design attributes of conventional media, such as newspapers and television [10].

With more women online and gender statistics almost reaching parity in North America [6, 11], retailers realized that capitalizing on the female market could boost the e-commerce agenda. Katherine Borsechnik, senior vice president at America Online, said “the early part of the e-commerce revolution was a revolution of rich white males... with 80 to 85 percent of

household spending controlled by women, the total retail dollars involved in that change is very high" [27].

Singh's [25] research into the gender imbalance of e-commerce in Australia points to the need to conduct further research on how the Internet is being utilized in the domestic environment. The questions she identifies as warranting more empirical research include those related to interpersonal relationships within the home.

Industry and cyber-pundits began to notice that more women were shopping online during the 1998 Christmas holiday season. In some cases, women accounted for 55% of web shopping [16]. Active courting of the "elusive female audience" [30] began in earnest. Reports predicted that "the ratio of men to women online will hit 50-50 in 1999." [5]. Observers predicted that categories such as apparel, health and beauty, and toys would benefit from a growing presence of women shoppers. Online health and beauty products industries are expected to grow from \$509 million to 1999 to \$10.4 billion in 2004. In order to attract women sites are becoming more interactive; Gloss.com features a 'virtual makeover,' where "customers can try on products virtually by choosing a model's image closest to her own" [18].

Media behemoths began creating portal sites for women, where various content, including e-commerce and online discussions, are easily accessible. As Internet start-ups and IPOs (initial public offerings) crashed onto Wall Street, it was inevitable that speculators would eye women's sites as a lucrative market. The media paid much attention to the \$87.6 million IPO in March 1999 of iVillage, a portal site providing online content focused specifically on women's issues. Specific iVillage network communities include book clubs, pets, astrology, and a recipe section. Not only does iVillage create their own content, they aggregate content from partnerships, that include Amazon.com, SportsLine USA, AT&T, Infoseek, and Schwab.

Perhaps iVillage's closest competitor is Women.com Networks. In January 1999, a joint venture between women.com and the Hearst Corporation to form Women.com Networks was announced. This venture brings together Hearst's HomeArts.com and Astronet astrology Web site). Women.com has also gained distribution rights for Hearst's women's magazines, including *Cosmopolitan* and *Good Housekeeping*.

According to industry communications group Jupiter Communications, HomeArts reaches 2.7% of women at home and work, while Women.com has a 1.2 percent reach. They are hoping that the merger will create a reach of 11 percent of women online, and a reach of 6 percent of the Internet audience [17].

Microsoft Corporation introduced Women Central, a Web site for women, in early 1999. The site features content from Women.com and

original material, including Microsoft's *Underwire* on-line magazine. Unilever Corporation, one of the giants in consumer food distribution is the site's primary sponsor.

According to Michael Goff, Microsoft Network's director of programming, "Microsoft hopes to help women do what they do best on line: stay put. Men tend to surf the Web and jump from site to site, but women are likely to visit fewer sites for specific tasks like joining on-line discussion groups or buying something" [9].

In September 1999, Procter & Gamble, one of the world's largest consumer products makers, announced the launch of Reflect.com, an Internet joint venture selling beauty products and services online. Fifty million U.S. dollars has been devoted to the company, which was "designed to provide beauty solutions to the millions of women" [20].

Women.com and *Good Housekeeping* announced a partnership to produce an online shopping guide for the 1999 holiday season. The guide, to appear in issues of *Good Housekeeping* and on the Women.com Web site, "will not accept advertising from any site unless it passes the Good Housekeeping Institute's tests for reliability" [14].

One of the more adventurous ventures is Oxygen Media, a converged Internet and cable site, created by Geraldine Laybourne, "considered one of the most influential women in the industry, mostly for her role in building Nickelodeon into a celebrated media brand" [21]. Partners include talk-show host Oprah Winfrey, Marcy Carsey, Thomas Werner, and Caryn Mandabach – "the team that created *The Cosby Show*, *Roseanne*, and *3rd Rock from the Sun*" [14].

4. NOT A FREE LUNCH

"There are two ways to produce content aimed at women: the 'Wal-Mart' approach, which offers a bit of everything to try to serve everyone, or the 'specialisation' approach, which focuses on specific interests" [21].

What sorts of women are being targeted by these commercial websites? Given that advertisers want the most bang from their bucks, it's not at all surprising that middle to upper-middle class women are the targets of sites such as women.com and iVillage. In essence, this is the same audience that is attracted to reading women's magazines, such as *Ladies Home Journal*, *Redbook*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Cosmopolitan*. Most women's fashion magazines, such as *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Elle* have an online component to complement their print magazine. iVillage's target customers are women between the ages of 25 and 49. This reflects a more affluent

class, including single women, stay-at-home-mothers, working mothers, and professionals. What is interesting to note is what women are *not* courted: not those in the lower socio-economic ranges, and, if network literacy reflects educational attainment, not poorly educated women.

So far, women's content and portal sites are designed for and by the North American market. Hollinger International Inc. is now trying to capture the British women's market, by joining forces with the U.K. drug store giant Boots Plc, by creating *handbag.com* [7].

Advertisers naturally want to attract more affluent audiences, and in the case of commercially sponsored women's websites, market segmentation rules. As Schiller [22, p.140] remarks, "current marketing practice portends no carryover into the consumer domain of the principle of equality of representation."

The consumer behaviour of men and women online has been a recurrent topic. Ellen Pack, one of the founders of *women.com* said that "men are surfers, whereas women are seekers, going on line to get specific information -- advice on acne or how to do a proper sit-up -- and not spending hours looking around" [28]. A spokesperson for *iVillage* said "We have applications and tools that help women get things off their to-do lists.' Accordingly, many women's Web sites are short on news analysis and are instead crammed full of advice" [28].

5. CONCLUSION: FROM E-COMMERCE TO E-COMMONS

"The Internet is a natural place for women," Oxygen Media's Ms. Laybourne said, "because they care so much about relationships and staying connected [29].

As digital capitalism continues unabated, new forms of content and services will be created. The tension between the communitarian aspects of the Internet community and the new vision of unbridled e-commerce is palpable. Can the competing values be reconciled? The corporatisation of the Internet has been presented as inevitable. Neo-liberal policies, the deregulation of telecommunication services, and a 'hands off' approach have been the options given to us in the guise of 'economic competitiveness.' While a diverse civil society has been able to utilize the Internet for social justice and democratic well being, their playing field is certainly not on as equal as the media behemoths.

The recent \$165-billion merger between America Online (AOL) and Time Warner was an example of the continuing corporatisation of the

Internet, with concern being raised about journalistic freedom [3] and a "giant media-Internet dictatorship" [4]. Media consolidation and increased power was compared to sexual pleasure, and conquest, by Ted Turner, Time-Warner's Vice Chairman who said that, "When I cast my vote for 100 million shares, I did it with as much excitement as I felt the first time I made love some 42 years ago" [12].

Escobar [8] challenges us to educate ourselves, not just about the political economy of the Internet, but about rethinking a new political ecology of the Internet, which will advance alternative social and political practices. He believes that women, environmentalists, and social movement activists on the Internet will be able to create new cultural practices emphasizing local place-based practices. This is perhaps our best defense against the countervailing tendencies exhibited by digital capitalism as we enter the next millennium.

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